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**“Imagining others more complexly”:**

## **Celebrity and the ideology of fame among YouTube’s ‘Nerdfighteria’**

**ABSTRACT:** YouTube has witnessed the growth of a celebrity culture of its own. This article explores the celebritification of online video-bloggers in relation to their own discursive community. Focusing on the VlogBrothers (John and Hank Green) and their community ‘Nerdfighters’, this article demonstrates how their philosophy of “Imagining Others More Complexly” (IOMC) is used to debate ‘celebrity’ and its legitimacy. Their vision of celebrity is egalitarian and democratic, rooted in Western culture’s ‘expressive turn’ (Taylor, 1989). It views each person as a unique individual and others as equal, legitimate subjects. Situating this discursive formation within the culture of web 2.0’s neo-liberal developments, the article seeks to explore the contradictory origins and uses to which IOMC is directed. While utilised to promote a vision of vloggers beyond the gaze and mystification of ‘celebrity’, it is also drawn upon by celebrities to manage and control perception and preserve good public opinion amongst the community. The article concludes with a discussion of how this philosophy may conceive of ‘celebrity’ as a model of expressive individualism beyond its commercial uses. ‘IOMC’ may be considered a state of ‘selfhood’ which allows each person equal space to consummate a unique vision of themselves.

**KEYWORDS:** YouTube \* VlogBrothers \* Vlogs \* web 2.0 \* participatory media

### **Introduction**

The celebritification of ordinary people is a crucial feature to new social media platforms. Part of what Turner (2009) calls ‘the demotic turn’ is a democratisation in the means of

accumulation for ‘attention capital’ (Van Kriekan, 2012; Driessens, 2013). The production and circulation of self via social media’s mechanisms of promotion, exposure and archiving all factor in this democratisation (Faucher, 2014; Rojek, 2014; 2012; Beer and Burrows, 2013; Driessens, 2012; Gamson, 2011; Marshall, 2011; Beer, 2009; Stiegler, 2010). Within celebrification debates (the process of ‘becoming famous’ (Driessens, 2012), there have been discussions of either how this celebrity is achieved, sustained and managed (e.g. Rojek, 2014; 2012; Marshall, 2011) or how it is to be conceptualised (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Dyer, 1998; 1986). However little work has explored how celebrification factors into the discourse of social media users, specifically online communities. What this articles attempts to do is respond to Driessens’ (2012) call for an unravelling of the process of celebrification: i.e. the social and cultural consequences of handling a celebrity persona as it is embedded in debates and practices around democratisation, personalisation and commodification (celebritization).

The case study here is the YouTube community ‘Nerdfighters’ formed around novelist John Green and his brother, entrepreneur Hank Green. They have been known on YouTube since 2007 as the VlogBrothers. At the time of writing they have 2,556,841 subscribers to their channel and over 500 million video-views. On average their videos receive a watch count of around 2-300,000. They also have other projects on YouTube including edutainment channels CrashCourse (3 million subscribers) and SciShow (2 million subscribers). The focus on this virtual community is to illustrate the presence and significance of their desire to ‘Imagine Others More Complexly’ (IOMC). This mantra is related to its significance to the YouTube vlogging community surrounding the VlogBrothers. First the article provides an outline on this discourse to illustrate its origins and meaning. Second the article proceeds to demonstrate how it feeds back into the discursive community of YouTube vloggers. Third it demonstrates that IMOC is a means to understand and promote an ideology of fame and the (cultural) politics of celebrity.

The argument is that IOMC promotes a democratic and egalitarian ideology of fame. IMOC is a philosophy of ‘self-other’ relations which attests to the radical uniqueness and unknowability of ‘the other’s’ individuality. IMOC is shown to be an ideology of fame which falls into a contradiction: on the one hand it is employed to promote a culture of the self which is ‘expressive’ and ‘unique’ to others, while on the other this same ideal is used self-servingly to preserve celebrity status as a form of impression and exposure management (Rojek, 2014). Used to foster a culture of ‘the self’ found in the democratic philosophies of modern society, ‘IOMC’ is also utilised by YouTubers more critically as a form of ‘exposure management’ on behalf of YouTube celebrities. While egalitarian/democratic, IMOC is (somewhat ironically) deployed as a discursive device to bolster fame, avoid criticism and celebrity downfall.

The reasons for why this is the case is twofold. First is an explanation from *form*. YouTube’s ethos and its ability to create DIY celebrity (Turner, 2006) through user-generated content means its form is highly amenable to such a democratic and egalitarian ideology. The second explanation argues that given YouTube’s putative democratic egalitarianism (despite limitations to this ideal (Beer, 2009; Tuner, 2009)) ‘celebrities’ come to act (and are obliged to act) as their own cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1986). Unlike other celebrity fields which employ a wealth of backstage intermediaries (impresarios, script writers, cultural brokers, PR and other expert advisors), YouTube celebrity *appears* (if not actually *is*) devoid of them. Notably this has generated a sense on YouTube that power plays in what Bourdieu (1993) calls ‘the production of belief’ in celebrity autonomy and charisma seemingly doesn’t exist. As such certain YouTubers utilise the discourses surrounding IOMC as a form of position-taking, in Bourdieu’s sense, to promote a vision of the YouTube celebrity field *as* democratic and egalitarian as well as seeing YouTube celebrity as *not-celebrity-like* (in a sense which implies irrational or damaging worship (see Rojek, 2012:47-48)).

### **Problematizing YouTube Celebrity**

We could say celebritization is built into the architecture of YouTube. YouTube as a form of media requires vloggers to *be* famous whether they like it or not, if by fame we provisionally use Munn's (1986) definition of the spatio-temporal extension of a person's name in the mouths and minds of others, beyond their immediate presence. Fame is the subject position of the vlogger; the qualitative difference is quantitative inequalities of attention capital. This does *not* mean every vlogger *desires to be* or *ought to be* thought of as a 'celebrity'. YouTube's early brand tagline 'Broadcast Yourself' implicitly implied the logic of celebrification, that is to broadcast is 'to become famous' if only because a media society follows a dictum that when one appears to others primarily by way of mediation, e.g. by screen, our collective cultural understanding is to categorise them as a 'celebrity' (Couldry, 2008).

The list of celebrity names who began on YouTube – Justin Beiber, Andy Samberg, Zoella – may not be extensive but enough to promote a discourse in and of YouTube as a 'fame factory' or a 'get rich quick scheme'. Satirising but also ambivalently endorsing this discourse, British vlogger and journalist Ben Cook's series *Becoming YouTube* uses as its leitmotif Ben's childhood desire to "become crazy, mad-boss internet famous." This discourse is not an empirical reality as YouTube began ten years ago and early vloggers success stories did not begin with ideals of 'being famous' or 'getting rich quick'. Instead early success gave rise to a potential idea that YouTube promotes such an idealised, democratic ideal of celebrity. Indeed parodied and ironically performed 'success formulas' such as 'The Cinnamon Challenge' actually suggest that the *tropes* are famous, *not* the vloggers who perform them.<sup>i</sup> For every 'would-be' vlogger hopeful there are many more who exist in digital obscurity. What the celebritization of vlogging has instituted is how the simple state of 'being watched' is indicative of a celebrity culture which elevates 'ordinariness' and accentuates the 'extra-ordinary' celebrity (Gamson, 2011; Turner, 2009). Indeed the indigenous economy of YouTube stars is run by 'creatives' who began as amateur 'content creators' and are fast becoming a central hub

to YouTube's internal televisual output: from pre-video adverts containing YouTube 'stars' to dedicated channels employing indigenous 'stars' as hosts. Additionally internal YouTube popularity is seen as fertile ground for the conversion of their celebrity capital to other media outlets, such as YouTube stars becoming Radio DJs, reality TV personalities or television comedians (British examples include Charlie McDonnell, Jack & Dean and Dan & Phil as BBC Radio1 DJs, Chris Kendall on BBC Three's *Live at the Electric* or Zoella appearing on BBC One's *Celebrity Great British Bake Off* for charity Comic Relief). These cases are exceptional and the obvious reality is that, of course, these YouTube celebrities are the few against which the many are measured.

While this is the case, what should be noted and problematized is how, and in what ways, does this culture of self-celebritization gain traction amongst persons and YouTube as a site of cultural production? Two competing ways of conceptualising this process helps illustrate an antinomy in modern culture. It is on the one hand an antinomy between freedom to forge a sense of oneself and individuality beyond ascribed (traditional, religious, status or classed) criteria. While on the other this same freedom is the basis of voluntary servitude to capital, exploitation and domination. In the analysis below, we find vloggers directly confronting the debate over YouTube celebrity in terms not dissimilar to academic analysis, some directly evoking concepts from sociology and cultural studies. By looking into recent debates over web 2.0 and the creative industries, what I want to problematize is how the socio-economic realities feed directly into the accounts vloggers are making about their own medium and performances on it. As will become clear, the VlogBrothers and other Nerdfighter vloggers deploy a similar philosophy to that found in the socio-cultural history of 'the self' in western society (Taylor, 1989). This philosophy of self, as will be shown, becomes the ideology of fame which vloggers draw upon to police and manage the cultural status of the 'celebrity' on YouTube.

A dominant account of the creative industries is a critical sociology and cultural analysis which sees web 2.0 platforms and older information technologies as a form of ‘free labour’ (Terranova, 2004), ‘prosumption’ (Ritzer & Jurgensen, 2010) or ‘playbour’ (Funhs, 2014; Beer & Burrows, 2013) exploiting the free time, play and user-engagement involved in the production of content. This same free time is the basis for the extraction of profit. As Fulcher (2014) acknowledges, web 2.0 obliges users to engage in practices of individualised free labour, entrepreneurship and invidious comparison on condition of use. Forms of use perfectly align with the neo-liberal ideology of everyday life as a site of invidious market- and capital-isation. In this respect, the vlogger is another ‘cognitariat’ in the neoliberal economy whose ideology “maintains that technology can unlock creativity, which is supposedly lurking unbidden in everyone, waiting to make us happy and productive” *but* whose reality is being “members of a precarious cogitariat... at the uncertain interstices of capital, qualification, and government in a post-Fordist era of mass unemployment, limited-term work and occupational insecurity.” (Miller, 2014:27) Here democratisation is a form of cultural labour dedicated to capital where one’s identity and working life comprise together and could easily lead to empowerment or exploitation.

While many scholars would agree with, or at least partially see the virtue of this account, there is also a potential utopian thread to much critical accounts (see Stiegler, 2010 for a perfect example). This utopian thread sees web 2.0’s user-generated form as also promoting an unforeseen democratisation in the forging of self-hood. Notwithstanding the first, in this second view we could apply a philosophically orientated analysis which could conceive of YouTube’s vlogging culture, and web 2.0 media more generally, as a site of individualised, ‘expressive selfhood’ (see note 2). This is localised in the vlog as a cultural form. As will be seen this philosophy of selfhood is also found in the VlogBrother’s ethical mantra of IOMC and utilised by vloggers to uphold a vision of vlogging that remains democratic and egalitarian.

Vlogs are monologues conducted in and through a dialogical medium where the modernist ideology of an introspective self with internal depth is simultaneously *performed* and *confirmed* as a socio-cultural ideal (Papacharissi, 2010). Yet the vlog is not a novel development. Its origins can be traced to 18<sup>th</sup> century romanticism where the modernist ‘expressivist turn’ took hold (Taylor, 1989; [Author, 2014]). The vlog stands as an example of the “expressive” self that Taylor dates to the Romantic poets (Taylor, 1989:368ff).<sup>ii</sup> For Taylor (1989), the expressivist turn gave rise to the notion that there are “inner depths” that lie uniquely within the individual. One’s ‘self’ is mined and forged from internal, inward introspection that is then articulated by voice or through some medium. Vlogger’s voices articulate their inner emotions, feelings and reveal their psychological state to a potential ‘you’, a recipient who is both themselves and an anonymous public. For Taylor, this expression is what he calls “making manifest” the ‘self’: one articulates their inner depth in some medium (voice, face, poem, novel, video-blog) and witnesses the ‘self’ as a product of their own creation *and* an object distinct from themselves in its objectification. This notion of the self as both subject and object has been shown to manifest itself on YouTube as vloggers: often ‘first-timers’ find themselves conducting a commentary on their own sense of self-consciousness (Wesch, 2009). As will be shown below, this self-commentary is a central part of the cultural significance of the VlogBrother’s philosophy of self found in IOMC.

In this respect, the ‘expressive self’ straddles not a tightrope of empowerment versus exploitation but rather a tightrope of individuality, between the *finitude* and *infinitude* in their making their ‘self’ manifest (Taylor, 1989:449-450). The vlogger exists in an infinite ‘open-event of being’ but once the vlog is recorded, they are consummated and finite. As Elsaesser (2010) and Lundemo (2010) have noted, the digital interface users experience with online, media technologies is indicative of ideas of infinity, finitude, divinity, omnipotence, plenitude and preservation. The expressive self is one of unique individuation (Taylor, 1989:375f) and



finds its cultural institution in the vlog. This is not to say it isn't subject to processes of exploitation or unequal empowerments (economic, cultural, gendered, racialized or classed) (see Lash, 2002:4-5). Rather 'the vlog' realises a sociological reality to this philosophy of self and its vision of individual freedom. This realisation can be found in what Marshall's (2014a/b) recent writings on *persona* indicate. While couched in the domain of capital and neoliberal discourses, a celebrity persona is necessary for self-hood: "online culture pushes most people to construct a public identity that resembles what celebrities have had to construct for their livelihood." (Marshall, 2014a:npr) Celebrity 'online', in the economy of YouTube fame, is of course subject to hierarchical positioning of persons and thoroughly commercialised. Yet self-celebrification by YouTubers, in a culture where all other users (celebrity or otherwise) submit to the same realities of content creation (Stiegler, 2010:51) puts everyone in a position of nominal equality.

For Taylor, the ideology of the expressive self contains an ethical consequence. The unique individuality each person possesses "determines how he or she ought to live. ...each of us has an original path which we ought to tread" and there is an "obligation on each of us to live up to our originality." (Taylor, 1989:375) This vision of selfhood which Taylor locates in the romantic poets finds its lay ideology in the Nerdfighter community as 'imagining others more complexly'. The aim of the next two sections is to illustrate first what it implies and suggests about 'self-other' relations and second how it is employed by YouTube celebrities to seemingly demystify celebrity idolatry in favour of a democratic and egalitarian form of engagement with YouTube. Yet the irony is that 'IOMC' is also a means of exposure-management. The ideology is directed toward the political purpose of managing and maintaining good favour as a celebrity.

### **On imagining others more complexly**

‘IOMC’ arose from the Nerdfighter community, specifically the novelist and one half of the VlogBrothers John Green. Green’s use of the phrase ‘IOMC’ comes from his own vlogs about his novels. It is an ethical mantra popularised by Green and concerns the value of literature to understanding other people’s subjectivity. As a popular philosophy, the unintended consequence is that it has become discursively utilised to promote an ethic of ‘self-other’ relations *and* critique YouTube celebrity culture, idol worship and the potentially damaging effects of fame.

While mainstream culture knows Green’s name from his No.1 *New York Times* bestseller, *The Fault In Our Stars* (2012), Green has been ‘famous’ on YouTube since around 2007. First starting a video-exchange diary with his brother, Hank, in 2007 entitled Brotherhood 2.0, the brothers went onto begin one of the biggest online communities, Nerdfighteria (a name based upon a video arcade game Green spotted in an airport in 2007). Seemingly a take on the ‘revenge of the Nerds’ trope, the Nerdfighter community are a series of like-minded persons united through enjoyment of John and Hanks videos. VlogBrother’s ‘vlogs’ consist of anything from life diaries, introspective ‘thoughts from places’, discussions of books, world events, politics, educational videos and others. Out of this, John Green has used his internet celebrity to promote his novels, notably those published since beginning VlogBrothers. It is notable in this regard that Green has acted as his own cultural intermediary (Bourdieu, 1986) beyond the traditional literary field (see below).

It was during the publication and promotion of *Paper Towns* (Green, 2008) that Green initiated his use of the phrase ‘imagining others more complexly’. In a video dated Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> February 2009 entitled ‘Paper Towns Tastic Question Tuesday’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4JVMv9Shpk>, accessed: 03/09/2014) Views: 197,823; Duration: 3:53), Green responds to questions from the Nerdfighter community. One question asks how the Walt Whitman poem *Song of Myself* became so central to the novel’s plot. Green

responds by suggesting that “*Song of Myself* is a beautiful poem that is deeply involved with how we can imagine other people more effectively.” Green then goes on to answer another question about how characters in the book mis-imagine each other: “I would also argue that whenever we’re imaging someone as more than a person, whether we’re Edward Cullan-ising them, or Alaska-ising them or Margo-ising them [two female characters in Green novels], we’re doing them and ourselves a profound disservice!” Green’s use of celebrity metaphor is instructive here. While he’s discussing literature, his philosophy is directed toward a moral, ethical purpose to curtail, limit or warn against celebrity idolatry.

While this short video is never explicit in its definition of what ‘imagining others more complexly’ consists of, it is clear that it refers to self-other relations and pointing to the inherently limited, partial and cloaked understandings we have of others. Namely it deals with this in relation to celebritization: to treat people as ‘more than a person’ is indicative of celebrity culture’s manner of treating (fictionalised) people, e.g. ‘Edward Cullan’, as mythic figures or personifications of universal categories – ‘beauty’, ‘sublimity’, and so on (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, it points to the problematic ‘self-other’ relation this puts in place. With Green, his male protagonist’s adolescent infatuation with certain females, such as Alaska in his first novel *Looking for Alaska* (2003) or Margo in *Paper Towns* (2008), illustrates how the romanticising, pedestalling, and so on, of a beloved is a solipsistic act which encroaches on the individuality and self-definition of ‘the other’.

Apart from Whitman’s poem, Green’s intellectual sources are also never explicitly cited. Yet some of his vlogs have references to a few which help contextualise this philosophy. One is sociologist Peter Berger (and Thomas Luckmann) ([1966] 1991) and another is American novelist David Foster Wallace (1989, 1992, 1995, 1996). While these sources refer to literature and social theory, Green employs them to speak to YouTube’s vlogging culture.

Wallace is often mentioned by Green and crucially Wallace's fiction itself is about trying to take the position of the other. Speaking to BBC Radio 3, Wallace stated:

“...there is something magical, for me, about literature and fiction. And I think it can do things, not only what pop culture can't do, but that are urgent now. One is that, by creating a character in a piece of fiction, you can allow a reader to leap over the wall of self and to imagine himself being, not just somewhere else, but someone else in a way that television and movies, that no other form can do. Because I think people are essentially lonely and alone and frightened of being alone.” (Wallace, 1995: npr)

American culture suffers what Wallace called ‘solipsistic delusions’ (1989). Pre-social media, popular culture was a culture of dis-connected lonely people: “We are the audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone. *E unibus pluram*.” (Wallace, 1992:153); “solipsism binds us all together.” (Wallace, 1989:309). Wallace's philosophy of popular culture concerns modernity's inherent loneliness and its inability for people to imagine themselves as other people. For Wallace, loneliness is only to be salvaged through writing fiction and having the reader encounter the novel as a text which allows them to ‘be someone else’. In a video dedicated to J.D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Green explores Wallace's argument. Bringing in sociologists Berger & Luckmann, Green states:

“There's this sociologist I really like named Peter Berger and he wrote in one of his books, ‘the difference between dogs and people is that dogs know how to be dogs’. And it seems to me that one of the ways we come into this world not knowing how

to be a person is that we don't really know what to do about empathy? Like the weird thing about self-consciousness is that you become aware of the fact that you can never really feel someone else's pain and that someone else can never fully feel your pain. [...] Now, the fact that human empathy is a limited human talent is a good thing ...the question becomes 'how do we get to a place where we can empathise enough, to take care of each other enough, to get through this veil of tears?'

(VlogBrothers, 'The Catcher in the Rye, Part 2', 2008:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUnQ-wOPGUE>

(accessed: 03/09/14) Views: 241,942; Duration: 3:42).

Here Green introduces the importance of the novel's devices of metaphor and symbolism for us to adopt the position of the other 'enough', to realise existential and experiential trails of selfhood 'enough', and assist with our imaging of others. There is partly a pedagogic dimension here, i.e. informing a largely teenage audience of why 'English literature' matters. But there is another, more critical dimension: this is an ideology of self-other relations which abets a vision of modernity as a society of spectacle and a popular culture devoid of an ability to imagine others emphatically and 'complexly'. A cultural lack found most often in treatment of celebrity. Notably Green's uses of literary sources popularises the philosophical and ethical outlines of the 'expressive self' which Taylor's *Sources of the Self* sketches. Taylor's ethical statements raised at a philosophical level are turned by Green into the language of the Nerdfighter community. While of course Green may have never read or indicated his affiliation with Taylor's communitarian democratic philosophy, he reaches similar conclusions.

In many ways this philosophy circuitously makes its way into YouTube vlogging and Nerdfighter practice. As noted above, the western philosophy of the expressive individual finds

its way into vlogger conduct and is vernacularized through the VlogBrother's IOMC mantra. Crucial is that 'IOMC' has itself initiated a discursive chain of its own amongst the community of Nerdfighters. This discursive community spans much of the blogosphere around the Nerdfighter community, with many posts dealing with people using Green's novels as critical devices to understand their own interpersonal relationships and contextualise them. Beyond a reflexive remedy to many personal troubles, however, more often than not it figures in the YouTube culture of celebrity itself. It is linked to or in reference to the experience of social media's mediation of one's self. To take one example, Steve (2010) says:

...I would like to take this one step further, however, and turn this ['IOMC'] into what I think so wonderful about the YouTube community. I mean everybody goes through that phase when you're trying just to get subscriptions because you want to be popular. I'll admit there was a time when that was one of my major motivations but you start to realise you make really good friends along the way. But why exactly is this? Well because we live in a community where it is now encouraged to be completely honest with each other, so we get a complex understanding of the people we are friends with. Sure we keep some secrets from each other but our videos are really just concentrated versions of our personality. By baring ourselves to the audience we actually aid them in seeing us complexly. ('fizzylimon', 'On imagining people complexly', 2010: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GF3ovB9faS0> (accessed: 03/09/14): Views: 1,219; Duration: 3.37)

This is merely one, indeed isolated, example and is certainly not representative (like much research on online communities, generalisations are often impossible (see Coleman, 2014)).<sup>iii</sup> Steve has been a dedicated vlogger since 2009 and to date retains a modest audience size (of 6,792 subscribers) and average view-counts of around 300 to 900. He is certainly not a ‘YouTube celebrity’. However he utilises the same performative cues and scripts (e.g. jump-cuts, verbal rhythms and cadences) and modes of presentation (e.g. visually enticing thumbnails). However what his video-quotation aims to demonstrate is how the IOMC mantra is not merely localised to John Green, nor ignored by the ‘NerdFighter’ community. Moreover its importance lies in that the logic of vlogging as a medium for ‘making manifest’ a self to ‘oneself and others’. It has an elective affinity to Green’s vision of literature for better imagining the world of ‘the other’. Vloggers readily see the connection between Green’s literary criticism and their own practice of video-making on YouTube.

The vlogging community around the VlogBrothers have adopted ‘IMOC’ and are utilising it in their discourse. Celebrity culture on YouTube around vloggers is subject to an ideological policing which, as suggested, arises from the democratised, expressive self-making that vlogging and other social media technology promotes. Within the Nerdfighter community, IOMC is part of the celebritization process (Driessens, 2012): it is an ideology speaking to the meta-processes ‘celebrity’ has gone through in a culture of democratisation, demotic-fame and dialogical media. IOMC amounts to how members of the Nerdfighter community are utilising Green’s ethical mantra to police and manage fame and ideologies of fame on YouTube.

In the next section, I show that the discursive trope of ‘IOMC’ is employed not merely as a philosophy of self-other relations but how it becomes employed as a device to maintain celebrity, the distinction between ‘self and other’, and ‘celebrity’ as achievable and (seemingly, if not actually) democratic. IOMC is not only an ideology of expressive self-hood but also a device to sustain celebrity station, to exploit this position and seek harmonious relations with

fans, viewers, and members of the community. It's a philosophy which has become the means to impose a moral standard to online celebrity/celebrification processes. Vloggers are not only naming and analysing their own medium (YouTube and the vlog) but also making normative arguments about how one *ought to* understand and conceptualise 'YouTube celebrity'.

### **How to 'imagine' celebrity more complexly: the ideology of YouTube fame**

The vlogging culture of YouTube has spawned an economy of stars. Yet given the dialogical nature of web 2.0 media, the fame debate on YouTube can become a means to contextualise, symbolically comment upon, but also potentially intervene. Such 'responsibility' (Lange, 2007) of web 2.0 products means many hierarchies and their materialisations become rendered potentially soluble, or at least, open to be demystified.

Paul Neafcy's 'Dangers of YouTube Worship' (2014) claims: "Many of the YouTube elite will get all misty eyed reminiscing about the days before the creator audience divide. When everyone made videos and everybody watched each other's videos [...] but that couldn't last [...] now that it's expanded [...] its project mayhem. [...]" ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsjDXuXn6EI&list=UU-hKCok28ZkxaRNbSxQA\\_VQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsjDXuXn6EI&list=UU-hKCok28ZkxaRNbSxQA_VQ) (accessed: 03/09/2014) Views: 16,435 Duration: 8.20). This distinction between creator and audience is rendered by Neafcy as having turned into that of celebrity and fan. The narrative which this debate over 'celebrity' on YouTube rests upon is a democratic, grass-roots communitarian ideal of video sharing. 'Celebrity' only signifies as the opposite of a 'vlogger' or 'creator'.

Neafcy's video was sourced from a playlist constructed by Mickleh on vlogger debate on YouTube celebrity culture (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvt-9fRmPjuZqFoN3nFBDGyMIJALWk-XI>). Mickleh's video 'YouTube celebrity culture'



continues an imagined lack-of-distinction between ‘creator and audience’ for YouTube prior to commercialisation:

“The old religion preaches it’s a messianic transformation of media. New media: New Rules. Or, New Media: No Rules. [...] YouTube is democracy in action. If you can press record you can have a channel [...] TV creates a gap between performers and audience. Performers: royal, godlike, up on pedestals. Audience: passive, peasants, potatoes, couch potatoes. But according the religion of YouTube there is no us and them, we are a community, all one level. We leave comments, we click like.”  
(‘Mickeleh’, ‘YouTube Celebrity Culture, Part 1’, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbm0g-S35mg> (accessed: 03/09/14)).

While in many ways reproducing some of the critical insights on celebrity culture made by critical theorists noted above, these concerns are voiced for a *normative* reason, not disinterested theoretical observation or sociological diagnosis. It would be more appropriate to view vlogger critical analysis as meta-critiques: critiques directed toward their own medium and position within a virtual community. Crucial to the meta-narrative on YouTube’s trajectory is how the community constructs a meta-critique of the process of video-production, promotion and exposure. The commentary is dedicated to exposing how power-plays are manifest online. Many contributors to the debate, ‘Mickeleh’, ‘Nefacy’ and others, seek to deconstruct celebrity with the tools of sociological analysis so as to de-mystify and re-assert community relations alongside a democratic (almost utopian) model of YouTube video-sharing.

Lodged within this debate, which includes ‘Nerdfighters’ as well as other much-viewed YouTube celebrities, is the use of IMOC in this broader discussion. In a video discussing the allegations of sexual abuse by certain British YouTube celebrities, Anthony D’Angelo poses a critique to celebrity culture on YouTube in similar fashion and draws out the moral and ethical ‘ought’ which his analysis contains:

I want to explore what celebrity has to do with it and why it affects people so much ...I want to do that by exploring this idea in sociology called para-social interactions.

All audio-visual mass media allows for this kind of one sided intimacy at a distance, something media theorists and sociologists refer to as para-social interactions. When somebody says that they love Justin Bieber, they don’t actually love Justin Bieber, they are in love with the constructed image of Justin Bieber, a persona, and what is important to remember is that this public persona is not a complete picture of who a person is. ... Like even right now, right, you’re not really seeing me, you’re seeing a version of me that’s a little bit more animated, who accentuates a little bit more, ...I am reading from a script, right, I’m editing myself to get my point across the best. (Anthony D’Angelo, ‘The Science and Dangers of YouTube Celebrity’, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-RmPyrUD94> (accessed: 03/09/14) Views: 21,149; Duration: 4.18)

D’Angelo’s use of sociological analysis in this meta-debate not only works to demystify celebrity, it also produces a double hermeneutic (in Giddens’ sense (1979)). Sociological

interpretation of social practice comes to be internalised by social actors and employed in future practice. D'Angelo's critique promotes the idea, adopted by YouTube celebrities, that they are 'meta-celebrities' [Author, 2014], i.e. that part of their celebrity performance is bearing witness to the constructed, self-conscious nature of their own celebrity. That being a celebrity is self-awareness of it and commenting upon it is part of what fame *is*, not merely its consequence:

So the question is, how do we keep those things from happening  
...? To answer I'm going to borrow from the VlogBrothers here  
[...] there is this truism that you should imagine people  
complexly, we need to acknowledge that the images of people we  
see in our media are just that, images, and images are treacherous.  
... We need to be critical of the institution of celebrity in all media  
but especially YouTube which, by its connective, egalitarian  
nature puts celebrities closer to fans than ever before... (Anthony  
D'Angelo, 'The Science and Dangers of YouTube Celebrity',  
2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-RmPyrUD94>  
(accessed: 03/09/14)

Here IOMC, as well as the democratising aspects of new media, becomes turned into a moral 'ought': an obligation on the part of the YouTube community to establish self-other relations, framed here as celebrity and fan, which are appropriately orientated to allowing 'celebrity' to be demystified from its reified, idolatrous state.

This continues. Vicky's video, 'YouTube Culture' (2014) discusses the position of the fan in precisely these terms:

Even just my absolute adoration of Carrie Hope Fletcher, I really  
love her videos, I love her personality, [...] doesn't mean I am

unable to imagine her as a complex human being. When I say I am a fan of Carrie Hope Fletcher what I understand that to mean is that I am a fan of the side of her, or the person that she creates or shows and puts on the internet. I understand that that is not the whole of Carrie Hope Fletcher and I think that is true for a lot of people. ('TheHopefulFamily', YouTube culture, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3segtU-9cXI> (accessed: 03/09/14) Views: 68,916; Duration: 8.16)

Again we see the demysifying exposure by way of revealing the conditions of vlog production and consumption. But Vicky extends this to demonstrate the power relation it puts in place: "You on that side of the camera need to understand that I am constructing everything you see and hear, [...] and you have to understand that I am not necessarily doing that for entertainment I could be doing that very much for my own benefit." (ibid.)

The power relation being exposed in this manner, however, does not mean that power relations go away. Instead, power becomes expressed differently. In a response to Vicky, Charlie McDonnell, one of the biggest names in YouTube celebrity culture, extends her argument:

The big YouTubers on this side of things, I think, they don't want to feel 'other', they don't want to feel special, they want to feel normal, they want you to see them as human beings, they don't want you to idolise them, they want you to imagine them complexly.

And I genuinely think that is all good advice [...] but there is a but [...]. It's your job now to think about us, to imagine

us more complexly, because we're people too you know, and we are forgetting that this gap that exists, that we're trying to close, exists between two groups of people, because we're treating it, I think, in a very one sided way. [...] some big YouTubers, not all, but some, have just as much of an issue imagining their audiences complexly as some members of their audience have imagining them complexly. [...]

[...] you already know you are not watching a person right now, that this is a YouTube video, that I have written and performed and edited and uploaded this for your enjoyment. [...]

(‘Charlieissocoollike’, Respecting Your Audience, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jje3LwnT4E0> (accessed: 03/09/2014) Views: 372,122; Duration: 4.40)

What we are witnessing is how the self-consciousness that arises with the web 2.0 DIY mode of content creation itself feeds an ideology of demystifying ‘celebrity’. But this is not to suggest that ‘celebrity’ is anymore liable to disappear; what it does is change the terms of debate and our understanding of it. What Charlie’s discussion amounts to is a rhetoric seeking to legitimate celebrity culture in keeping with a John Green-inspired philosophy of self-other relations. Crucially, this is impeccable exposure management. We must note how Machiavellian this is: ‘the prince’s’ possession of fame was preserved through expert management of their public persona, their *virtu* (Rojek, 2014:10; Skinner, 1979:118ff). In this case, on YouTube the management of the medium, – its egalitarian, dialogical and democratic benchmarks, – by deploying the ideology of IOMC amounts to a re-legitimation of celebrity prowess and its attendant deserts.

YouTube celebrities exist within a *nominally* egalitarian and democratic medium, hence their modes of justification in their exposure management are drawn toward IOMC as an ideology. To borrow an argument of Fredric Jameson's (1981:140-144) on form and ideology, the realities of YouTube vlogging's form sediments such egalitarianism despite its social-cultural realities producing inequalities, hierarchies and a psudeo-aristocracy of YouTube fame. As such, these achieved celebrities and their attention capital is managed by appealing to this ideology as a type of self-intermediary work. Lacking cultural intermediaries who mediate the point of cultural production and audience consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014; Rojek, 2014), YouTube celebrities are obliged to be their own intermediary in the field of YouTube 'self-other' relations. This is because their ordinary, yet unique, individuality that is 'made manifest' on their YouTube channel also is the basis upon which all other YouTube, celebrity or fan, celebritification depends. A comparison with another internet culture of self is helpful to clarify this point – the hacktivism group Anonymous (Coleman, 2014; Merck, 2015). The power of their mask and anonymity for hacking is also a sacrifice (Coleman, 2014:16); it is a sacrifice of "individualism itself, the self-promotion that melodrama and its cultural heirs effectively underwrite." (Merck, 2015:284) YouTube's expressive individualism is subject to such melodrama of their own purported individual uniqueness. IOMC becomes the self-serving legitimation device in this culture of unique and authentic individuals.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the discourse around 'IOMC' is utilised toward the self-preservation of fame, celebrity capital and exposure management. But ultimately the analysis of YouTube's Nerdfighters helps provide an understanding of the lived practice and cultural politics of expressive individualism manifest in 'IOMC'. We have to ask why an interpretation of celebrity drawn from literary sources has been so readily drawn upon by this community.

Marshall (2014a) has underlined the importance of *persona* to understanding how the public-self of the celebrity manifest through online culture may not necessarily be true but rather strategically directed to various desires which the *persona* facilitates. In Bourdieusian terms *personas* are scripts for position-taking in a field of power. So, too, is 'IOMC'. However, IMOC goes further and conflates literary characters (fictional people) with celebrity. The distinction between literary characters as celebrity instead of dramatic *persona* as celebrity is crucial. The literary analogy speaks to a self-other relation which is more akin to author-hero (Bakhtin, 1984) while the *persona* analogy speaks to a self-other relation of actor-audience (Marshall, 2014a).

John Green's use of IOMC refers to how literature helps aid an understanding of the subject-position of 'the other': only through fiction is the 'complex' picture of the others radical uniqueness possible. However, this position wouldn't be able to be drawn upon by the YouTube community if they themselves were not in a similar position as authors. This becomes evident in how the vlogger's above show high reflexive awareness of the vlog's 'form'. Moreover this awareness of form – i.e. of how YouTube videos get made – is an awareness of themselves as 'authors'. It is through the affordances of form on social networking sites that vloggers learn to navigate and negotiate their perceptions of self, other, public and private (boyd & Marwick, 2014). Additionally vloggers demonstrate awareness that all others submit to the same conditions of user-engagement.

As such vlogging for 'Nerdfighters' (and more generally) is understood to be a polyphonic space of individual self-authorship and thereby permits IMOC to become a viable belief system for them. Wesch (2009) has shown vloggers often engage in commentary about their own status as vloggers, while the analysis here further points to how this meta-commentary is turned into a lived ideology. These vloggers show a strong awareness of not only a potential audience but are also aware of how the very process of recording, editing,

scripting and posting videos makes them not only an object of other people's perception but also how this perception is a limited, imperfect realisation of their whole individuality. For every vlog written, edited and posted, there is an inexhaustible potential of other vlogs which could be performed. The vlog itself provides the possibility of infinite speeches and points of view. And each vlog is an insufficient, limited realisation of this possibility. Hence why IOMC plays such a significant role in the Nerdfighter vlogging community: it is an idea appropriate to the polyphonic platform which endorses a multiplicity of human voices and points of view. When it comes to people *not* IOMC what is being referred to is an ability to see 'ourselves' as 'other' through the authored selves objectified when using social media technologies. As such 'celebrity' is then attempted to be understood or conceptualised by the Nerdfighter community as disproportionate quantitative measures of authoring oneself and viewing self and others as partaking in this 'complexity'. In this way the social-political dangers of celebrification become ones of having to understand how authorship works. For instance, Green's use of examples of 'Edward Cullen-ing' people refers precisely to how solely viewing people as singular, limited beings is also a forgetting of the complexity of the human author behind their celebrity façade.

The ideology of IOMC is employed ultimately in two, competing senses. The first is that it is a philosophy of self-other relations which is apposite to the form of vlogging and user-practice on YouTube where all voices are equal and valid. The second is an ideology in a field of unequal power-relations: those who do endorse and use it to preserve their own 'equal and valid voice' in a polyphonic space where theirs is heard more than others. The two hang uneasily together. What is being protested in YouTube celebrity culture is the treating of YouTubers, celebrity or otherwise, as being treated as projections of other people's consciousness. IOMC is a discursive device which may be utilised in highly hierarchical economy of stars, but has as its ultimate aim an egalitarian individualism. This is why, despite



its many faults, “[t]he aristocracy of fame is with us for a reason. Even the best of us need someone to look up to...” (Rojek, 2012:ix).

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<sup>i</sup> I owe this astute observation to an anonymous peer-reviewer.

<sup>ii</sup> It should be made clear that I am using Taylor's work on the 'making of the modern identity' to carve out an interpretation of YouTube video-blogging. Of course, Taylor's concerns are historical/philosophical and not to be taken wholesale.

<sup>iii</sup> With regards this article's methodology, the source material was gathered over a two-month period when [author's research assistant] searched for, watched and transcribed videos on YouTube using the 'tags' and 'keywords' "imagining others more complexly", "vlogbrothers", "John Green", "John and Hank", "understanding others", "celebrity", "celebrity culture", "YouTube celebrity." In this way we utilised the methods of data extraction of user-usage for YouTube and its materialisations of content (Beer, 2009). While this method of data-generation is limited by not being exhaustive in the age of 'big data' it is however apposite for our purposes. It selects material from a 'discursive community' unified by their engagement with the VlogBrothers philosophy of self-other relations. Crucially, selection of videos was determined on whether it was in dialogue with either one of the others used, or utilised the terms of reference of others. While YouTube's architecture is set up for dialogical media to thrive through tags, comments, embedded links and auto-play features, the analysis of transcript content was how the final decisions of inclusion and analysis were narrowed and honed.